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ABSTRACT

This paper provides a review of the literature on the topic of sex roles. The author identifies two levels on which to study this issue: (1) the social identity model and the dramaturgical perspective, which can serve as a unified theoretical framework for phenomena and findings related to sex roles; and (2) a lessening of the terminological and conceptual level of sex role literature. The author has reconceptualized the sex role stereotypes and sex roles as equivalent rather than as separate concepts fit for different research traditions. (Author/YRJ)

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Some Terminological Reconceptualizations in Sex Role Research

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Work in the area of sex roles presents tremendous difficulties for researchers, and for good reason. Because sex roles lie at the interface of numerous disciplines--psychology, politics, sociology, economics, etc.--comprehensive research in the area is virtually impossible to carry out. Moreover, because findings in this area are so controversial and do have very serious implications for so many people, it is necessary to interpret and discuss results with extreme caution and with structures, qualifications, and warnings concerning generalizability.

However, research on sex roles is of the first importance--for the same reasons. What the area of sex roles needs are comprehensive and interdisciplinary theorization. Steps in that direction are being taken.

(This symposium is an attempt to discuss some of these efforts. Diane Bridgeman has raised some important theoretical issues about what we should be studying, and the other panelists will present some of the methodological innovations that are being developed in order to increase the range and precision of sex role research.) I will propose one form conceptual housecleaning can take--by means of an example of its application.

For a while now, I have been looking through the literature, trying to make some sense out of it. Attention has been focused on trying to determine what researchers mean rather than what they say in their writings. This approach was taken partly out of necessity. The sex role literature at present looks much like a terminological Wonderland, with dozens of Humpty-Dumpty's engaged in research on concepts that are being used to mean precisely what particular researchers want them to mean. Researchers will use the same terms differently (e.g., sex role identification), or will use different terms to refer to equivalent concepts. The area of sex roles appears to have gotten bogged down in its own terminology.

Therefore, the most sensible approach seemed to be to take a critical look at the conceptualization in the area. Hopefully, a focus on meaning rather than mere terminology would permit a simplification of the literature. Further, conceptual simplification might facilitate interdisciplinary communication. Ultimately, such terminological revisionism should pay off by enabling us to construct the basic vocabulary required for interdisciplinary thinking and research in the area.

One possible direction will be exemplified by considering sex role stereotypes and suggesting a reconceptualization of them in terms of role demands. Such a reformulation makes possible social psychological explanations for certain findings in the sociological sex role literature. I will argue that a reformulation of sex stereotypes in terms of role demands 1) makes possible the construction of a link between sociological and psychological thinking and research; and 2) obviates the need to distinguish sex role stereotypes from role demands.

Sex role and sex role stereotype are two of the major concepts in the area. However, they have generated two almost independent lines of investigation. The former has been used in numerous studies of preference, identification, and

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development. Sex role stereotypes, on the other hand, have been investigated for their "descriptive" characteristics--as exemplified by the work of Rosenkrantz and the Broverman's on people's conceptions of females and males.

Brown (1958) says that a sex role "consists of the behavior that is socially defined and expected of...(a) person because of his or her status as a male or female." This definition has two important elements: the fact that the definition is at least in part externally determined (i.e., socially defined), and that the concept includes expectations or demands. Other definitions also emphasize these two aspects. For example, Hartley (1959) states that sex roles are externally defined--by the culture--and are something into which the individual must fit. Finally, Simon & Gagnon (1969) regard a sex role as a socially scripted behavior, and as including elements that are either unrelated to sex or only become related once sex has become salient for the individual. In role theoretical terms the non-sex related aspects of the role refer to attained statuses, which are not inherent in biological sex differences, as are ascribed roles (e.g., childbearing abilities, etc.). It is, I will argue, the demands of these roles that are reflected in sex stereotypic conceptions of males and females.

Sex role stereotypes are defined by Rosenkrantz et al. (1968) as "extensive agreement among people as to the characteristic differences between men and women." The descriptive nature of the concept is much more obvious than was the case with sex roles. Furthermore, the definition does not include a strong expectancy component. However, stereotypes often do carry certain behavioral implications--ways of behaving as a result of holding these stereotypes--and these introduce a strong prescriptive component, which is for the most part ignored by researchers on stereotypes.

This behavioral (and implicitly evaluative) aspect of sex role stereotypes represents an interface between two facets of sex role research--stereotypes and role demands--and also between two disciplines--psychology and sociology. However, while sex role stereotypes are being studied by clinical psychologists, sex role prejudice is being investigated primarily by sociologists (e.g., Levinson, 1975; Gross, ; Knudsen,). The problem lies in the dearth of cross-communication between these two disciplines. What we have are two sets of theoretical explanations for concepts, which, I will argue, are conceptually related.

To illustrate this point, consider three sets of findings. First, Levinson found that individuals telephoning for jobs (of relatively low status) were often discriminated against when they applied for jobs generally considered more suitable for members of the opposite sex. In some cases, although the caller was not considered for the advertised job, the employer would suggest other openings within the organization. When the caller was male, the suggested jobs were generally of higher status in the organization than the advertised position, whereas female callers were generally offered lower status jobs when they inquired about a typically male job.

Next, consider Gross' (1968) findings that the amount of sex segregation in various occupations has changed little in 60 years, and that whatever changes have occurred served to open typically female professions (e.g., keypunching, nursing, etc.) to males, but without corresponding increases in availability to females of characteristically male professions (e.g., managerial). In other words, women have not been finding it easier to get the jobs that males usually occupy, while men have been gaining increasing access to "female" professions.

Finally, Knudsen (1969) reported that woman's status in terms of occupation, income, and education--has been consistently declining--due in part to decreased efforts by women because of social opposition in the form of discrimination. I quote Knudsen: "given the conviction that women should not pursue occupations in competition with men, women and employers together develop a self-fulfilling prophecy. Women, ambivalent about careers and convinced that they will face discrimination, make lesser efforts than men, permitting employers to justify discrimination by appealing to evidence of lower achievement and commitment to employment. The effect is the perpetuation of a belief that sexual equality exists and that only effort is lacking, to which social scientists have offered their support."

The findings I just mentioned strongly suggest that sex role stereotypes represent more than merely descriptive characteristics pertaining to females and males. Rather than being regarded as beliefs about what people are like, sex stereotypes are much more plausibly interpreted as people's conceptions of what people should be like (i.e., sex stereotypes are a form of role norm or demand).

It turns out, as Kohlberg & Uhlian (1975) have found, that children as young as six already have strong stereotypic conceptions of what men and women are like--based largely on physical differences, such as size, voice, strength, etc.--and that these conceptions also determine what children think they should be like. Even six year olds commit the naturalistic fallacy. Small wonder then, that girls and boys should develop the identities and self conceptions they do.

Besides the theoretical issue of what all of this says about the conceptualizations of sex role stereotypes and demands, two questions must be considered here: first, can we find a plausible explanation for these findings; and second, what can be done to change such a state of affairs?

The social identity model developed by Sarbin & Scheibe can be applied to the above data. Briefly the model views an individual's identity within society as at least in part defined by the roles that she or he enacts in interactions with others. These roles vary on three dimensional continua: 1) whether they are attained or ascribed (i.e., achieved or granted); 2) the degree of involvement required to fulfill the role; and 3) valuation going from disrespect to high esteem. According to the model, one can gain esteem only from performing attained roles. Ascribed roles are those that must be carried out (e.g., parent), and enacting these has no reward. Rather, one can be disrespected for inadequately enacting an ascribed role. The more attained roles one enacts without failing to fulfill necessary ascribed roles, the more esteem one stands to gain. Further, more prestigious roles carry more potential esteem.

Some of the model's implications should be clear. Males can obtain a great deal of esteem because their attained sex roles are much more broadly defined while their ascribed roles are not as salient as those of females. Females, because the options open to them are much more restricted, whereas their ascribed roles are much more precisely defined and salient, will lack the opportunities to gain this esteem. Any effort to transcend the attained female roles would imply that the person is very likely shirking an ascribed role (e.g., a working mother cannot be as good a parent as one who stays home with her children). Thus, the woman's efforts along this line will be met with negative evaluations.

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The social identities that women and men develop will consequently differ greatly, but not because of any inherent differences between the sexes. Rather, this difference in level of esteem (and therefore in positive self image) will most likely be the result of 1) differential efforts to enact certain roles; and 2) differential reactions by others to efforts to fulfill certain roles.

Individuals will receive feedback from two sources regarding their behavior, and this feedback will in part determine the resulting identity. The feedback can come from those people with whom the individual interacts, and also from the person's own conceptions of the world. The Kohlberg & Ullian findings demonstrate the significance of this latter source.

While adult females are not necessarily negatively valued in any absolute sense, the female identity is seen as less positive relative to that of the male. This is not surprising considering the findings I mentioned before, especially regarding the differential availability of high and low status roles to women. If only roles with relatively little esteem attached are reasonably accessible to women, then a decrease in their efforts to enter the labor market on a par with males is not surprising. Now, Sarbin & Scheibe's model can account for the phenomena on both the individual and the social levels--that is it combines the psychological and sociological. However, time limitations preclude a more complete elaboration.

Well, given such an unfortunate state of affairs, what can be done to change it? On this matter, the various approaches in the literature are either silent or inadequate. Because of its concern with descriptive rather than prescriptive aspects, the stereotype research offers little help here. Similarly, the sociological literature mentions legal measures to decrease the inequities. However, as Knudsen's findings clearly indicate, these imperatives can be sidestepped. In fact, Knudsen himself argues that this is so precisely because of the normative, or prescriptive, nature of the sex role definitions.

At first glance, even the social identity model described above does not appear as if it would be overly useful. However, it derives its dynamics from a larger approach to social interaction--the dramaturgical perspective of Burke, Becker, Goffman, and others, which suggests possible tactics for ameliorating the situation. According to the dramaturgical perspective, meaning is defined through the process of action. That is, the significance of an interaction or a situation lies precisely in the actions that make up the encounter. Therefore, it follows that the "way things are" results from what is done. Doing makes it so.

In other words, the model suggests deliberate deviation from expected roles as one way of breaking the existing role prescriptions. Legislation will not bring this about, but action will. Then, once the dominance of the old role demands has declined, our tendency to commit the naturalistic fallacy should result in the construction of a new set of role demands--hopefully a set that escapes the marked disparities now existing. In short, since people seem to adjust to most states of affairs, especially those which they themselves have brought about, it is argued that one way of breaking down stereotypic role demands is simply to engage in conduct that deviates from these demands. Eventually, since we seem to legitimize our actions through the naturalistic fallacy, the new sets of behaviors will become the standard.

While this sounds quite glib and easy on paper, such an effort is clearly no mean task. It will require men as well as women to deviate from their stereotypes.

How close we are to such a condition is unclear, although Sandra Bem's work on androgeny may reflect the first stirrings of such a movement.

In any case, this presentation was not meant to change the world, but was merely trying to bring a bit of order and simplification to the overly complex sex role literature. This order can be seen on two levels. First, the social identity model, and the dramaturgical perspective, can serve as a unified theoretical framework for phenomena and findings related to sex roles. Second, in the process of this theoretical simplification, the terminological, and hence conceptual, level has also been pruned a bit.

This simplification derives from the reconceptualization of sex role stereotypes and sex roles as equivalent rather than as separate concepts fit for different research traditions. Nevertheless, much more still needs to be done for sex role research and theory.

I have been able to present only the barest outline of one set of simplifications. The arguments proposed above need elaboration and must be considered in much more detail to determine: 1) whether they actually do serve to order a significant portion of the research findings; and 2) whether they can be used to encompass still more theory and terminology. While sex roles remain a blooming, buzzing confusion, we are slowly turning this disorder and disagreement into sense and sensibility. In this symposium we are trying to present you with some of the efforts being made in the area. Hopefully, you will consider what we say, and use that which you find of value to carry on this program.

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